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ABSTRACT

Noting that violent behavior is learned, often early in life, this booklet offers early childhood educators helpful violence-prevention information and suggestions based on early childhood research and the wisdom of good practice. The booklet begins by reviewing young children's emotional needs and developmental characteristics, and then suggests effective ways of helping children manage anger, learn self-control, and solve problems peacefully. The booklet concludes with a list of resources and Websites with links to books, brochures, videos, and professional organizations. (HTH)

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a child learns for life...

Teach carefully!

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VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

HOW TEACHERS CAN HELP

What this booklet provides

This booklet offers early childhood educators helpful violence-prevention information and suggestions based on early childhood research and the wisdom of good practice. It starts with the basics—young children's emotional needs and developmental characteristics—and then suggests effective ways of helping children manage anger, learn self-control, and solve problems peacefully. Much of it is just plain common sense applied to the classroom. To learn more about how teachers can help prevent violence, see the resources and Websites listed at the back of the booklet. They offer many links to books, brochures, videos, and professional organizations.

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IN today's world it just isn't possible for children to avoid exposure to violence. Newspapers and newscasts remind us of that every day. Some children experience violence in their homes or neighborhoods. Others see adults and older children behaving in angry, out-of-control ways that stop short of violence but are scary and troubling. And almost every child is exposed to violence in TV programs, movies, and video games.

Why begin early? We can help!

Violent behavior is *learned*, and unfortunately it is often learned early in life, when the brain is making critical connections. But that's where we come in. Along with families, early childhood teachers and other caregivers can be crucial buffers in protecting children from violence and supporting their healthy development. Just as children can learn to be violent, they also can learn—through a loving relationship—to be good citizens, in self-control, patient, and understanding. With adult support and guidance, children can learn constructive ways to solve problems, deal with disagreements, and handle anger. Children who learn these skills early in life actually practice violence *prevention*—something valuable throughout life.

Early childhood teachers and other caregivers can be crucial buffers in protecting children from violence and supporting their healthy development.

Warm, nurturing relationships with teachers strengthen children's ability to cope with stress and trauma. Within those relationships, teachers can show young children effective ways of managing anger, help them deal with the effects of violence, and help protect them from getting involved with violence. As role models and guides, we can demonstrate how to manage conflict and deal with negative feelings in positive ways. With this early foundation of knowledge and skill, children are more likely to develop positive relationships with other children, enjoy academic success, complete school, and lead more productive adult lives.

Good early childhood education as a curriculum for nonviolence

The daily experiences we provide for young children are powerful, not only for preventing violence now and later but also for increasing children's chances to have a productive, happy life. Research shows that high-quality early childhood education can reduce behavior problems in later childhood and beyond.*

Good early childhood programs differ from community to community, but they have several important things in common. They

- ensure frequent, positive interactions between adults and children, to build relationships and to support learning
- organize daily activities around goals that are challenging *and* achievable for children, encouraging play and exploration combined with adults' supportive involvement
- plan curriculum meaningful to young children, building on their experiences and interests and taking them further (yes, even babies and toddlers have a curriculum—it's just more informal and very individual)
- balance the program with active and quiet activities, small and larger group work, time for vigorous large-muscle play as well as use of fine muscles of fingers and hands, teacher-planned and child-initiated activities.
- give balanced attention to all aspects of children's development and learning: physical, social, emotional, aesthetic, cognitive, language and literacy
- use careful observation to identify children's strengths and to document concerns for intervention, follow-up, and possible referral
- involve family and community members, strengthening connections with children's lives and cultures
- provide many opportunities for children to learn social competence and emotion regulation by playing and learning with others, with the guidance of skilled teachers
- create a sense of community in the classroom by infusing democratic processes

These characteristics of high-quality early childhood education help create a strong foundation for learning nonviolence. Within these programs, adults can build another part of that foundation—meeting children's emotional needs.

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* The National Association for the Education of Young Children accredits early childhood programs that meet its standards. A nationwide listing of accredited programs can be found online at www.naeyc.org.

Meeting young children's emotional needs

We can't afford to wait until problems appear. Every child has basic emotional needs. If teachers and other adults meet those needs, we have started that child on the path to a satisfying, nonviolent life.

Children need to feel safe and loved. First and foremost, young children need to feel physically and emotionally safe. There is no surer way to start children on the right path in life than to provide consistent, reliable, loving care. Families come first of course, but our relationships with the children we teach are powerful tools for protecting them from violence, now and later.

Children need positive role models. Children learn how to behave by watching people around them. In addition to the adults in their families and communities, that includes characters on television, in videos, and in movies. And of course children learn by watching us, their special, beloved teachers.

We teach children, by example, how to get along in the world. When we come together with the children in our class, or with our co-workers, to solve our problems peacefully, children see and learn how to deal with people in a positive way. But when we or other adults close to the children are explosive, aggressive, or destructive, children learn to act the same way.

Children need to be protected from exposure to violence. When children, even very young children, see or experience a violent act, they are deeply affected by it. This is especially true if the violence involves a family member or someone they know in the neighborhood. As we know, children don't leave these experiences at the classroom door.

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What can we do to help? First, we should always allow children plenty of time to talk about violence they have seen at school, in the neighborhood, or on TV. We can encourage them to express their feelings verbally and to use pretend play and expressive art as

other ways of communicating. Second, we can make our classrooms places of refuge. Let's show children many examples of people dealing with each other in friendly, cooperative ways. The children will gradually realize that there are many ways to deal with people and to resolve conflicts peacefully—that violence is not the best way to get what they want.

Children who are victims need adult help—NOW. A child who is being abused lives with constant fear and pain. And while physical wounds may heal, emotional scars can last a lifetime. Children need to count on adults to get them out of violent or abusive situations. When children believe *they* must find a solution to a problem, they often believe they *caused* the problem. No child should carry this burden.

Early childhood teachers are legally mandated to report suspected abuse. If we know of a child who is being abused, or if we think someone may be abusing a child in our care, we should seek help immediately. By doing so, we may save a child from unimaginable physical and emotional pain. And in the longer run, we may save that child from growing up to become a violent adult, or falling into a pattern of repeatedly being victimized.

Helping children handle frustration, anger, and aggression—Matching strategies to ages and individual needs

Not all negative emotions turn into violence. Everyone gets frustrated, upset, angry, and even aggressive at times—it's part of being human. The next section of this booklet describes some typical negative behavior shown by children from birth to age 8, grouped into four age categories. But keep in mind that your children may not fit neatly into these patterns, because of temperament, culture, or individual experiences. For each age group, we'll describe age-typical ways of expressing negative feelings and then suggest some ways that early childhood teachers can help children regulate their emotions—not ignoring or hiding them, but guiding those feelings into appropriate channels.

NEWBORNS TO 9 MONTHS

Cries are a baby's method of communication. A good caregiver responds immediately to an infant's cries and attends to her needs, assuring the child that adults can be trusted. Attentive primary caregivers learn to tell the difference between a baby's cries. They know which cry indicates hunger and which one signals a wet diaper, so

they are always alert to cries of pain or anger. Cradling and stroking reassure fussy babies. We can talk and read and sing, walk and rock and sway. Soft rhythmic music exerts a calming effect. A pacifier helps some children calm themselves. Child care teachers carefully note unusual patterns of distress in a log or journal and share these with families, so that together they can figure out how to help.

9 TO 18 MONTHS

Older babies and pretoddlers, up to about 18 months, still cry and fuss, but they now express anger in new ways and for many new reasons. Crawling and walking bring new perspectives: lots of curiosity and a growing sense of self. However, children don't yet have the language skills to express their needs, desires, or emotions. They cannot control their impulses. They easily get frustrated—for example, when they don't get an object they like, when a favorite adult is away or a stranger gets too close, when they feeling tired or ill or frightened. These intense feelings can sometimes result in tantrums, even kicking or biting.

Knowing the daily level of frustration experienced by pretoddlers, caregivers can provide the children with invaluable tools for dealing with emotions and the inevitable outburst. As language skills im-

Persistent Behavioral Problems: Time to Step In?

Some aggressive behavior is to be expected when young children are just learning self-control. But teachers should recognize that when a young child's behavior is constantly out of control, angry, and aggressive, the misbehavior can

- hurt that child or others,
- interfere with the child's learning and making friends,
- damage property,
- lead to school failure,
- create tension and stress at home and in school, and
- set the stage for serious problems as the child grows older.

Persistent behavioral problems can be a symptom that the child is experiencing unusual stress or trauma. We must listen carefully and observe closely to pick up clues to the source of the frustration and anger, and perhaps call for further assessment and referral.

prove, a pretoddler should be encouraged to use words to tell how he or she feels. "I mad" or "Want doll." But a caregiver can expand: "Oh, you want that doll—it makes you angry that Maria has it?"

Carefully note unusual patterns of distress in a log or journal and share these with families.

To defuse a tense situation, use distraction or redirection. Invite a tired and cranky pretoddler to the book corner. When a child hits or bites, kneel down, hold her hands, calmly state the rule, and ask or describe why she is angry. A child in the throes of a tantrum may need to be soothed by holding—but always in the spirit of protection and never anger. Again, observant caregivers notice and log behavioral patterns and triggers so they can anticipate problems and talk them over with parents.

18 MONTHS TO 3 YEARS

Most toddlers are still easily frustrated. Compliant one minute, stubborn the next, declaring No and Mine again and again, and constantly testing limits, the toddler is expressing his growing awareness of self.

Older toddlers become interested in peers and begin to see the benefits of cooperation, although sharing or waiting is still hard. At this age, they are just beginning to understand that others have feelings and rights too. Language has become important. Some toddlers don't yet know the words to express their feelings. Others may have more language skills but can't connect feelings with behavior. But all make some attempt at self-regulation.

Teachers rely on all the methods used with pretoddlers but increasingly give older toddlers more opportunities to solve problems and experience success. To foster social skills, teachers join and model play and initiate sharing and turn-taking games. Children should be reminded of the rules; when necessary, teachers should clearly state the consequences and apply them fairly. Some simple precautions work—for example, three or four of a popular toy is better than one each of many toys.

4 TO 8 YEARS

Children from about ages 4 to 8 gradually get better and better at expressing themselves in words, and they get angry about what people say as well as what they do. Instead of just thrashing around, they often aim their aggression at another person—perhaps directly, by hitting or fighting, or perhaps indirectly by damaging something

the other person cares about or by hurting the relationship they have with another child ("You can't come to my birthday party!"). When anger flares, teachers can help preschoolers learn and practice self-calming methods—for instance, by taking a few deep breaths, sitting down, and counting to 10, or by repeating "Be cool, be calm."

Around age 4 or 5, most children—again with adult support—can think of more than one way to solve a problem and they can predict how people will react to their actions ("If I hit George, he will hit me back, but if we take turns with the truck, we won't fight"). When we help preschoolers with words and examples, they learn to name their own feelings and those of others ("I am *mad* because Sandra won't let me on the swing" or "Carlos is *sad* because his balloon popped"). Children about this age also begin to show that they care about other people's feelings and well being ("Mark, I'm sorry you hurt your knee"; "Rebecca will be happy when she sees the picture I drew for her").

"Anger Concepts": Essential Principles for Young Children to Learn

As children begin to understand language, we can gradually teach and reinforce some basic principles—not just with words, but also with our actions and example. Here are some concepts to stress and reinforce with young children:

- It's okay to be angry.
- There are "okay" ways and "not okay" ways to show our anger.
- It's not okay to hurt anyone, to break or throw things, or to hurt pets when we are angry.
- It's okay to tell someone that we are angry.
- There are ways to calm ourselves when we are angry.

Older children, around ages 6 to 8, have more tools to use in dealing with anger, stress, and conflict. They can understand how others might see a problem differently than they do and they can talk about a situation more clearly. They start to worry about rules and fairness.

Always encourage preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school children to explain what happened and how they feel. After a child is calm, we can ask what is wrong and *listen* to the explanation, without interrupting. We should help the child think about the problem and come up with ways to change the situation that caused the anger. If a child who is upset is reluctant to express himself verbally, encourage him to act out, write/dictate, or draw events and emotions. Sand/water play, playdough, puppets, and pretend play are all avenues that a child can use to express himself.

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Helping children learn social problem-solving skills

Sometimes it seems easiest just to *tell* children what to do if they have a conflict with another child ("Edward, you can ride the trike for two more minutes and then you have to give it to Adam."). But although this may work in the short run, in the longer run children are better off if they learn to solve problems on their own. Adults and children who can manage the strong feelings and resolve conflicts reasonably, without hurting someone, have good skills for *social* problem solving.

Monitoring Our Own Anger

As education professionals, we have a responsibility to monitor our own anger. Let's reflect for a moment on how we react to difficult situations. How do we behave when tension builds up? When children get restless on a rainy day? When a co-teacher lets us down? When a child has a toileting accident? When a toddler bites another child?

Remember, children learn by watching us solve problems with respectful words and nonviolent actions. The most important way to teach children how to handle anger is to show that we can calm ourselves, think about our own actions, and take reasonable, nonviolent steps to change the situation that made us angry. Only when we respond to anger in a calm, respectful manner can we begin to help children control their own angry feelings.

Children become confused, scared, and angry when adults hurt them, especially the people whom they depend on to love and protect them. The child who suffers continual physical punishment or is subjected to harsh, demeaning words can become aggressive and out of control—just the opposite of what we want to accomplish.

Yelling at children, using mean sarcastic language, or yanking a child who is out of control—all of these are signals that our own anger has escalated to a potentially harmful level. If we have trouble controlling our own temper, we should get help through anger management training or by seeing a mental health professional. Just as we have a responsibility to report child abuse, we also have a responsibility to report ourselves when we cannot control our emotions and behavior.

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As early childhood professionals, we can help children develop social problem-solving skills, adapting our methods to the ages and experiences of the children. We can help young children stop and think about different ways to solve a problem, help them choose to act in a way that is nonviolent, safe, and fair. We should not expect more than young children are capable of, but we can constantly encourage them to think and make good choices.

Social problem solving can be taught—and the earlier, the better. With support from families and teachers, children at around age 3 are usually ready to begin the simple steps of reasoning and making choices, which are part of social problem solving.

As children grow, they get better at solving problems. Again, we must make sure that children understand that it's okay to make mistakes trying to solve problems and that we can *all* learn from our mistakes. We should always encourage children to seek help from trusted adults when a problem is too hard for them to handle.

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When a child calms down, tells how he feels, describes a problem, thinks of a solution to a problem, or acts in a way that is safe, fair, and nonviolent, we should share our pleasure in him as a person and a member of our community.

Violence prevention through appropriate discipline and guidance

Harsh, inappropriate discipline can create violent messages in young children's minds. "Stop it or I'll smack you!" Children who have experienced harsh, inconsistent discipline are at increased risk for later aggression and other problem behaviors.

When an early childhood program is well organized,

appropriate and educationally effective, and truly interesting to young children, children will be better behaved. But even in the best circumstances, no child's behavior is perfect all of the time and some children are harder to deal with than others. When we must act to stop a child's unacceptable behavior, our goal should always be to do it with self-control and without violence. The goal of discipline is to teach children *self-control*, not to punish them. And discipline should be only a small part of a broader focus on *guidance*. We must also refrain from labeling any child as "bad." We can tell children that we do not like their unacceptable behavior, but we must always reassure them that we still care for them and want to keep them safe.

A Note about Spanking

People have a variety of opinions about spanking, but the reality is that hitting or spanking children sends a confusing message. It says it's okay to hurt someone you love in order to control them or solve a problem. Repeated harshly, over time, it trains children to punish others with force—the same way that they were punished. For these reasons, most states' child care licensing regulations forbid any physical punishment in early childhood programs.

Foundations for acceptable behavior

The best way to get young children to behave the way we want—and to prevent escalation into anger and even violence—is to build a foundation of love and respect. We must pay attention to children when things are calm and comment on their good behavior. With a large group of active young children, this can be difficult—but it does pay off. Compliment children for sharing a toy with a classmate or for putting their toys away or for avoiding conflicts with other children. If children get attention only when they misbehave, they will repeatedly act up to get attention.

We can teach children self-control by modeling good behavior; setting reasonable limits and rules (keeping them simple and involving children in the rule-making when possible); applying consistent, age-appropriate standards for behavior; and having consistent consequences for misbehaving (understanding, though, that we all have "bad days" and that some children have special needs requiring adaptations).

Some guidance tips

Appropriate, effective guidance depends on children's ages and developmental stage, individual characteristics, and family and community values. Here are some techniques that may help in the classroom. For further techniques, consult the resources listed at the end of this brochure.

Appropriate, effective guidance depends on children's ages and developmental stage, individual characteristics, and family and community values.

Try to ignore behavior that is irritating but not dangerous—for example, whining, swearing, or tantrums. Paying attention to such behavior may just encourage more of it, because attention itself—even negative attention—is rewarding. On the other hand, calling attention to good behavior is effective. For instance, we might point out, "Wasn't that kind of Sherry to help Tom with his puzzle? or "Malcolm, I saw you stop and think before you threw the truck."

Distraction or redirection is a good place to start. Shifting a child's attention is an effective tactic.

Be positive. Let children know what you expect, with simple statements and reasons ("Please put the blocks away so we can use the rug for our book time."). Tell a child what to do, rather than what *not* to do ("Please use a soft voice," instead of "Stop yelling!"). Follow through with sincere and specific praise.

Natural and logical outcomes can teach lessons. When a child ignores friendly, repeated warnings about what might happen, sometimes the best option is to let it happen. We can—if the child is old enough—allow the child to see the connection between his action and our reaction (a child colors on the wall, his crayons are taken away, and he helps clean the wall). Of course, this should *never* be our approach when safety is at stake—for instance, when a child walks ahead of the group into the street or when the outcome would deprive the child of needed food, rest, or learning opportunities.

Intervention is sometimes necessary. When young children fight or argue, a teacher should place herself between them. If possible, we should kneel to get to the children's eye level. Let them know you understand that they are upset. If they are fighting over a toy or object, calmly hold the object until the problem is settled. Ask each child to tell you what is wrong, and sincerely listen to what they say. If they are old enough, ask both children to think of ways they might resolve the problem. Help them think about consequences ("If we do

Don't Ignore Media Influences

As every early childhood teacher knows, media—especially television, but also videos, movies, comic books, music lyrics, and computer games, even some news broadcasts—have a strong influence on children. On one hand, such media offer powerful tools for learning and entertainment; on the other hand, violent images and words in the media are damaging for young children. The extent of children's exposure to television violence is stunning, but new research suggests that violence in video and computer games may be even more harmful.

Violence in the media

- gives children violent heroes to imitate
- increases mean-spirited, aggressive behavior
- shows children that violence is an acceptable way to handle conflict
- makes it easy for children to ignore suffering and the bad effects of violence
- causes fear, mistrust, and worry (sometimes including nightmares)
- whets the appetite for viewing more violence, in more extreme forms.

We should bear in mind that even when the "good guys" win, the effects of media violence are the same. As children get older, those who watch a lot of television have lower grades, especially in reading. After all, they are substituting TV for homework, study time, reading practice, imaginative play, and interaction with others.

As early childhood professionals, we can encourage families to limit young children's TV viewing. And we can talk with children, even preschoolers, about violence in the media. Help them to understand that

- violence in the media is make-believe, not real
- real life violence hurts people
- guns, bullets, knives, and other weapons on TV are fake; real weapons hurt or kill people.
- if a show is scary or confusing, they can talk to an adult about it.
- violent toys may seem exciting in "pretend" games, but real-life violence is not fun.

We should encourage and model ways to play and pretend that don't involve violence.

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this, then what will happen?"), and help them choose a solution that is fair and nonviolent. Watch what happens: If it works, praise them; if not, have them choose another solution and try again.

If one child clearly has been hitting or picking on another, speak to the victim first, allowing him to say what he wants and how he feels. Encourage the victim to face the aggressor and say how he feels—perhaps something like this: "I don't like it when you push me. It hurts and makes me mad!" With younger children, you may need to help with the talking. Be sure that the aggressor doesn't get more attention than the victim.

A Warning about Weapons

A child's curiosity about weapons can be deadly. Children don't know the difference between a deadly weapon and a toy. It is heartbreaking to hear of accidental shootings and serious injuries by children who handle guns or play with them. We can encourage families to take steps and precautions to keep weapons locked up. Teach children to *never* touch a gun, bullet, or knife. Let them know that if they find one, they should immediately tell a trusted adult about it.

Use time-out carefully. Time-out is a method that some teachers and parents use to give children (and adults) a short cooling-off period. If we choose to use it, we should keep the time short (a rule of thumb is no more than one minute for every year of a child's age) and follow these guidelines:

- Do not use time-out to humiliate or punish children and do not threaten children with it.
- Choose a safe, supervised spot where the child can be quiet and undisturbed.
- Ask the child to sit quietly, without talking to anyone, until he or she is calm and ready to have a discussion.
- Remind the child that at the end of the time-out, the two of you will talk about her behavior.
- When time-out is over, keep your promise and talk with the child about what happened. Do not lecture! Problem solve with the child and come up with other ways to solve or avoid the problem.

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A final thought

As part of a young child's daily life, we teachers and caregivers have a critical influence on that child's development. What we teach children today will make a difference in who they are tomorrow. We early childhood professionals must use our knowledge and skills to show a path to nonviolence for children, for their families, and for the community.

Information and resources

NAEYC, the American Psychological Association, and other organizations have extensive resources related to violence prevention, problem solving, discipline, and anger management. Here is a brief summary of materials and information that can help teachers, families, and others who are working to bring their community together to prevent violence before it starts. Additional resources are listed online at the ACT Against Violence Website: **www.actagainstviolence.org.**

Brochures and other publications

Helping children learn self-control—an NAEYC brochure.

Raising children to resist violence: What you can do—a brochure from the American Psychological Association & American Academy of Pediatrics. Also available online at www.apa.org/pi/pii/raisingchildren.html

Love and learn: Positive guidance for young children, by Dr. Alice Honig—an NAEYC brochure.

Early violence prevention: Tools for teachers of young children, by Dr. Ronald Slaby & others—an NAEYC publication.

NAEYC position statement on violence in the lives of children. Available online at www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/psviol98.htm.

NAEYC position statement on media violence in children's lives. Available online at www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/psmevi98.htm

Media violence and children: A guide for parents—an NAEYC brochure.

Controlling anger before it controls you—from the American Psychological Association. Available online at www.apa.org/pubinfo/anger.html

Discipline: Appropriate guidance of young children—an NAEYC video.

Violence prevention for families of young children—a brochure from the American Psychological Association and NAEYC. Available online from www.actagainstviolence.

For materials listed above that are not available online, call NAEYC or APA to order copies:

NAEYC Resource Sales Office: **202-232-8777, ext. 2001**
or **800-424-2460, ext. 2001**

APA Public Interest Office: **202-336-6046**

Web sites

ACT Against Violence: **www.actagainstviolence.org**
American Psychological Association: **www.apa.org**
Center for Media Education: **www.cme.org**
Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: **www.colorado.edu/cspv/**
Children's Defense Fund: **www.childrensdefense.org**
Committee for Children: **www.cfchildren.org/**
National Association for the Education of Young Children: **www.naeyc.org**
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: **www.cdc.gov/ncipc/**
National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information: **www.calib.com/nccanch/**
National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse: **www.childabuse.org/**
National Institute on Media and the Family: **www.mediaandthefamily.com**
ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families: **www.zerotothree.org**

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